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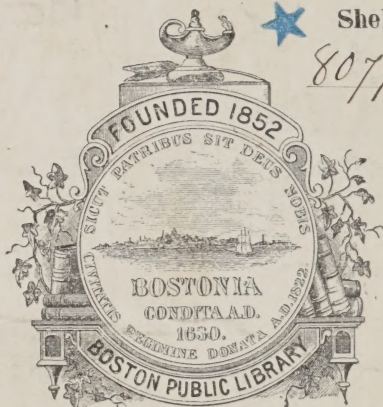
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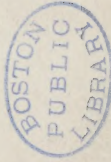
"The Quest of the Holy Grail."

The honour of your company is requested on the 19<sup>th</sup> January,  
at the Private View of the paintings  
which form the first half of the series to be done by

Mr. E. A. Abbey,

for the decoration of the

Public Library of Boston, U. S. A.



9, Conduit St., W.  
10 a. m. to 6 p. m.



# “THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL.”

THE FIRST PORTION OF A SERIES OF  
PAINTINGS TO BE DONE FOR THE  
DECORATION OF THE  
PUBLIC LIBRARY OF BOSTON, U.S.A.  
BY EDWIN A. ABBEY.

by  
Henry James

NOW SHOWN FOR A LIMITED PERIOD  
AT THE GALLERIES 9, CONDUIT ST., W.  
DAILY FROM 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

JANUARY 1895.

Edwin A. Abbey,  
Feb. 15, 1895.

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## THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL.

THE beautiful story of the quest of the HOLY GRAIL has been treated by poets and composers, but the undertaking of which the subjects here exhibited form an instalment is perhaps the first attempt to give it continuous pictorial illustration. Invited to cover with a series of designs having at once a romantic reference and a unity of theme the walls of a large room in the New Public Library of Boston, United States, Mr. Abbey conceived the idea of unfolding in a coherent order several of the features of one of the most confused and mystical, but most noble and most universal clusters of legend that has come down to us (through Walter Mapes in England, Chrétien de Troyes in France, Wolfram of Eschenbach in Germany: all 12th century storytellers,) from the twilight of European literature. The artistic question became for him largely a question of selection and adaptation—adaptation, in particular, to conditions of space and architectural form in the chamber to be decorated. Certain simplifications and compressions were inevitable, such as, in the present series, the attribution to a single hero of adventures and experiences of which, in the old romances, now one personage, now another—Galahad, Percival, Lancelot, Sir Bors—becomes the wonderful subject. The incarnation of ideal knight-hood in the group here exhibited is that stainless Sir Galahad with whom—on different lines indeed—a great English poet has touched the imagination of English readers.

The HOLY GRAIL was fabled to be the sacred vessel from which our Lord had eaten at the Last Supper and into which (having purchased it from Pontius Pilate,) Joseph of Arimathea had subsequently gathered the divine blood of His wounds. Its existence, its preservation, its miraculous virtues and properties were a cherished popular belief in the early ages of European Christianity, and in the folk-tales from which the twelfth-century narrators drew their material it was represented as guarded for ages in the Castle of the Grail by the descendants of the "rich man" to whom the body of Jesus had been surrendered, where it awaited the coming of the perfect knight who alone should be worthy to have knowledge of it. This perfect knight is introduced to us in the romances of the Arthurian cycle, so largely devoted to the adventures of the various candidates for this most exalted of rewards. Incomparable were the properties of the Grail, the enjoyment of a revelation of which conveyed, among many privileges, the ability to live and to cause others to live indefinitely without food, as well as the achievement of universal knowledge and of invulnerability in battle. This revelation was the proof and recompense of the highest knightly purity, the perfection constituting its possessor the type of the knightly character; so that the highest conceivable emprise for the companions of the Round Table was to attain to such a consecration—to cause the transcendant vessel to be made manifest to them.

The necessary brevity of these few indications excludes any detailed account of the episodes Mr. Abbey has treated. The following is an extremely restricted attempt to place before the visitor the meaning of each composition.



I. In the first the child Galahad, the descendant, by his mother, of Joseph of Arimathea, is visited, among the nuns who bring him up, by a dove bearing a golden censer and an angel carrying the Grail, the presence of which operates as sustenance to the infant. From the hands of the holy women, in the legend, the predestined boy passes into those of the subtle Gurnemanz, who instructs him in the knowledge of the things of the world and in the duties and functions of the ideal Knight. But before leaving the nuns he has performed his knightly vigil—watched alone, till dawn, in the church.

II. This ordeal terminates in his departure, which forms the subject of the second picture. Clothed in red, he is girt for going forth, while the nuns bring to him Lancelot, who fastens on one of his spurs, and Bors, who attaches the other.

III. In the third composition the Artist deals with the Arthurian Round Table and the curious fable of the Seat Perilous,

“fashioned by Merlin ere he passed away,”

the seat “perilous for good and ill,” in which no man has yet sat with safety, not even the fashioner himself, but into which, standing vacant while it awaits only a blameless occupant, the young Galahad, knighted by Arthur, has sworn a vow to be worthy to take his place. In Mr. Abbey’s picture he comes to do so. The

companions are seated in Arthur's hall, and every chair save one is filled. Suddenly the doors and windows close of themselves, the place becomes suffused with light, and Galahad, robed in red, is led in by an old man clothed in white, Joseph of Arimathea, who, according to one of the most artless features of the romance, has subsisted for centuries by the possession of the supreme relic. The young Knight is thus installed in safety in the Seat Perilous, above which becomes visible the legend "This is the seat of Galahad."

IV. In the fourth subject Arthur has formally instituted the Search for the Holy Grail, and the design gives us the Knights about to go forth on their mission. They have heard mass and are receiving the episcopal benediction, Galahad always in red. Although in fact, in Mr. Abbey's series, the "bright boy-knight" of Tennyson, he is not, as the poet represents him, "white-armoured."

V. In the romance Sir Galahad's first success is a success fatally frustrated: this is the drama of which Mr. Abbey's fifth composition consists. The artist's chosen order places this incident early in the young Knight's career, while many of the probations and adventures in which it abounded, and some of which form the subject of later compositions, are still to come. The locality represented has the stamp of an age more primitive than that of the scene of the previous incidents, for a reason which this chapter of the legend itself gives us. The chapter is one of the most singular. Amfortas, the Fisher King, King of the Grail, as the legend has it—the *Roi Pêcheur* of Chrétien de Troyes—having been

wounded several centuries before for taking up arms in the cause of unlawful love, lies under a spell, together with all the inmates of the castle, the Castle of the Grail, into which Mr. Abbey introduces us. From this strange perpetuation of ineffectual life they can none of them, neither women nor men, priests nor soldiers nor courtiers, be liberated by death until the most blameless knight shall at last arrive. It will not be sufficient, however, that he simply penetrate into the castle: to the operation of the remedy is attached that condition which recurs so often in primitive romance, the asking of a question on which everything depends. Galahad has reached his goal, but at the very goal his single slight taint of imperfection, begotten of the too worldly teaching of Gurnemanz, defeats his beneficent action. Before him passes the procession of the Grail, moving between the great fires and the trance-smitten king, and, gazing at it, he tries to arrive, in his mind, at an interpretation of what it means. He sees the bearer of the Grail, the damsel with the Golden Dish, the two knights with the Seven-branched Candlestick and the knight holding aloft the Bleeding Spear. The duty resting upon him is to ask what these things denote, but, with the presumption of one who supposes himself to have imbibed all knowledge, he forbears, considering that he is competent to guess. But he pays for his silence, inasmuch as it forfeits for him the glory of redeeming from this paralysis of centuries the old monarch and his hollow-eyed court, forever dying and never dead, whom he leaves folded in their dreadful doom. On his second visit, many years later, he is better inspired; but this episode is comprised in the portion of Mr. Abbey's work still to be completed, which will, in that event, be exhibited.



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